

All Things New
2 Corinthians 5:16-21
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I'll admit that I'm not a person who likes to give up control easily. I hope not too many of you have already learned that about me. This is especially true in my personal life. But I came to the realization not too long ago that I needed to let go of something I was holding too tightly, and that was my wardrobe.

I've always thought of myself as someone who had decent taste in clothes. I could put together matching outfits, I never wore a striped shirt with plaid pants, my socks were almost always the same color. But what opened my eyes was Tim coming here to CCC. Tim is a very snazzy dresser. He's hip; he's cool. And I realized that I was about 10 years behind the fashion curve.

So I gave my wife Leigh complete control over my wardrobe. I let her sort through all my clothes and toss out the ones that she thought were outdated, which was pretty much everything. (10 a.m.-Out went the MC Hammer parachute pants. Out went the Members Only jacket.) If you bought a piece of men's clothing at last year's garage sale, there's a 57% chance it used to be mine.

Then, slowly, she began to rebuild my wardrobe. Pants from Old Navy, shirts from Eddie Bauer. Nothing fancy or expensive, but tasteful and from this century. I would come home from work and there would be a new shirt waiting for me. I had a new wardrobe and renewed confidence to go out in public without getting laughed at. I'm a bit embarrassed to admit my wife dresses me – not literally! – but I felt like a new person.

I believe that feeling is a Godly feeling. I say that because the Bible repeatedly makes the point that our God is a God of new things. This is not a status-quo, keep-things-as-they-are-God. In Isaiah, God says, "Forget the former things, do not dwell on the past. See! I am doing a new thing." Through Jesus God offered a new covenant and a new commandment. He has given us a new teaching and promised us a new heaven and a new earth. This is not a God who encourages us to stay the same.

That's the point Paul is trying to make the Corinthians in our reading today. Paul founded this church in Corinth, and ever since had a contentious relationship with them. Corinth was a cosmopolitan port city, which means all kinds of temptations existed to distract the Corinthian Christian. They were constantly being pulled away from their growing faith and back into old destructive behaviors. So Paul would write letters to them encouraging them to keep the faith.

In this particular passage today, Paul is dealing with something that hits a little closer to home for him. The Corinthians had let themselves be persuaded by false teachers to question Paul's credentials and his authenticity as an apostle of God. They were judging Paul by worldly standards instead of by the standards set by God. So Paul tells them, "From now on we regard no one from a worldly point of view."

That one phrase has huge implications for the Corinthians, because the worldly view around them was antithetical to their Christian view. A person's value, a person's wealth, a person's influence would have all been determined in worldly ways. When people looked at Jesus from a worldly point of view, they saw who he was in the flesh,

but missed who he *really* was, missed it so badly that they killed him. To know Christ in the flesh is to know him as a miracle worker and prophet descended from David; but to know him as a savior is completely different. It's fundamentally incompatible to look at someone from a worldly view and expect to see them as God sees them.

As Paul tells the Corinthians, the only way we can see this is if we stop looking through old eyes. Paul says, "The old has gone, the new has come!" That translation doesn't quite do the Hebrew words justice, because it implies a replacing. But what the Hebrew actually says is that, "the old things have passed away and been transformed into the new." It's not replacement; it's transformation.

When I was in college my lemon of a car finally gave out on me, so my dad bought me a beat-up Ford Mustang. It wasn't pretty, but it started, which was pretty much all I needed. The seats of the car were in particularly bad shape. The leather had deep slashes in it, and so much stuffing was coming out that no amount of duct tape could keep it all in. So my dad told me to take it to a local car upholstery shop and he'd pay to have the seats redone. I was expecting a patchwork job, but what I got when I pick the car up was a complete transformation. The shop had taken the old seats and restored them to their original, without a scratch or a blemish. That's how God works with us. God takes what we have, what we are, and through our faith in Christ, transforms us, restoring us to our original intention.

Therefore, the evidence of our faith is transformation. If we're the same person after church that we were before church, then we're missing something. That's not a comment on how good or bad the sermon is; I believe in a God that can speak even through bad sermons. Encountering the word of God should transform us. Something should be different after we've heard God speak. Paul says God has reconciled himself to us, meaning he has taken steps to bring us back into relationship with him through what he has done in Christ. God sought *us* out. That move by God should not leave us unchanged. An understanding of the gift and meaning of Christ's death – not from a worldly view but from a spiritual view – should have implications for how we live our lives each and every day.

That's what Paul is telling the Corinthians when he says that Christ has committed to us the message of reconciliation. God sent us Christ, who then sent us the Holy Spirit, who created the church. We are direct spiritual descendants of God called to carry on his reconciling work, helping to bring people to God.

Paul uses an interesting word to describe us. He calls us ambassadors. Dictionary.com defines an ambassador as "an authorized representative or messenger." In our world today, ambassadors are commissioned by the head of their home country and serve on behalf of their government in foreign nations. They live and move among these foreigners, representing their country to those who do not know it.

What a perfect image of our work here on earth! We also have been commissioned by the head of our home country. If we believe that our citizenship is in Heaven, then we also are living in a foreign nation, surrounded by people who don't know much about our home. And we are called to represent – or re-present – the values and love of our home to these people. We are strangers here, called to share with those around us the reconciling love of God.

But as Paul tells the Corinthians, how can we do this work if we haven't accepted the fact that we have been changed? If we claim to have been made new, but aren't living

like we've been made new, then what message are we sending? When we call ourselves a Christian – and don't think that's not a bold statement to make – we are making certain claims about who we are and what we believe. But if we say the Lord's name on Sunday but act and speak on Monday like we've never met him, how are we doing as an ambassador? The honor of Christ is in our hands. By our words and actions we can make people think more – or less – of Christ and the church.

To be ambassadors, to stop regarding people from a worldly point of view, to accept the reconciling love of Christ, we must accept that God has made us new. This is not a cosmetic change; this is not just putting on new clothes or getting a new hairdo. This is a fundamental change that only God can make in us. We are not simply offered a new perspective that they may or may not adopt as and when we see fit. Rather, something so fundamental has changed in such a profound fashion that the old ways of looking, perceiving, understanding and evaluating have to be let go and replaced with this new way of seeing and understanding.

A determining factor of this change is how we see others, and that's what Paul is trying to help the Corinthians see. We can't put obstacles in front of a person's value. They don't have to conform themselves to our way of seeing or acting or believing to be valuable. Each person's value has been established by Christ's death, not by their response to that death. People, whoever they are, whether or not they have responded to Christ, are loved by God. Paul was reminding the Corinthians that their acceptance of Christ should transform how they think of him and those around them. Our view of everyone is different once we've been transformed.

Did you notice that spring is in the air? As we get closer to Easter, we are moving into a season of newness. The earth is awakening from its sleep, throwing off its blanket of snow. Trees are starting to bloom and flowers are beginning to blossom. Signs of new life are all around us. As we move through Lent, may the recognition of what Christ has done for us also bring forth newness within us. Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, they are a new creation. The old has gone; the new has come!